Syrian women are strong agents of change. With proper support from donors and humanitarian agencies, we can help protect them from gender-based violence, to thrive and participate in peace efforts and the eventual rebuilding of their country.

The Syrian conflict has been raging for almost five years, deeply affecting and uprooting the lives of millions of people inside and outside the country. Despite the attention the conflict has garnered, the desperate voices of women and girls have mostly gone unheard as they rarely get a chance to talk about their needs and the challenges they face.

Donors and humanitarian agencies have increasingly recognised that women and girls are specifically targeted in and affected by emergencies. Through high-level commitments such as the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative and the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-based Violence in Emergencies, the international community has acknowledged the relationship between conflict and gender-based violence (GBV). Incidents of GBV tend to increase during conflict, when violence and insecurity exacerbate the root causes of GBV—such as worsening and normalising power imbalances between men and women—while simultaneously contributing to the breakdown in community structures and support systems which would previously serve to offer some protection for women and girls. As a result of these global initiatives, the international community has agreed that more needs to be done to prevent GBV, to protect women and girls and to provide survivors with the services they need to not just recover, but to thrive.

While donors and humanitarian actors cannot end wars or crises—only a political solution will bring an end to the conflict in Syria—we can and must prevent the immediate risks that women and girls face during these times with focused determination, a coordinated plan and the resources to back it up. Women and girls need and deserve more than unmet promises and more than rhetoric – they deserve action.

Despite massive demand, programmes to help protect Syrian women and girl from gender-based violence accounted for less than 0.2% of the whole Regional Response Plan contributions in 2014. The IRC, in conjunction with UNFPA, has calculated that the total needed for GBV protection and prevention from the 3RP and HRP protection budgets in 2016 is $206 million. The unmet need is huge. We urge donors at this conference to commit new aid money to help fill this funding gap, and make a real difference to Syrian women and girls.
The barriers and violence facing Syrian women and girls

"Women are afraid to go out, they are even afraid to open the door if someone knocks. I hear a lot of stories about girls being kidnapped, adult and young girls alike. My daughter was crying to go to the market yesterday… I told her that she couldn’t and that her brother would go instead. I don’t feel safe when they leave the house.”

—Amani, JORDAN

Over 75% of the refugees in need of assistance in the region are women and children. Yet the particular challenges they face are under-reported. Women and girls have fled war and targeted violence, and too often have found no safe haven inside Syria or in neighbouring countries. Instead, they face the threat of violence every single day when walking to school, inside their tent, shelter or home and when seeking food or other humanitarian aid; this is further compounded by their weak legal status in most countries.

IRC’s 2014 report Are We Listening? Acting on Our Commitments to Women and Girls Affected by the Syrian Conflict saw many women, girls and men confirm that Syrian women and girls suffer daily sexual harassment and assault, increasing domestic violence and early and forced marriage.

Sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse outside of the home

“My teenage daughter was applying for a job when the shop owner said to her, ‘I crave you— if you refuse to give yourself to me then you can forget about a job.”

—Thana, AGE 42, JORDAN

Syrian women and girls spoke of an increase in harassment and exploitation because of their displacement. They told the IRC about the constant threats and acts of sexual exploitation, harassment and assault they face daily from host communities, landlords and aid workers, which often confine them to their homes or tents for protection and to defend their honour. When women and girls are prevented or discouraged from leaving their homes, they are unable to access aid and services in the same way men and boys can.

No Safe Haven: Increased Violence in the Home

"Men are becoming angry—they can’t provide for their families. My husband wasn't a smoker—now he is. He is extremely irritated all the time and takes it out on the children. He is violent towards the children; he is violent towards me."

—Haifa, AGE 38, JORDAN

Often forced to stay inside their homes because of this increasing abuse, too many women and girls do not find safety there either. They told the IRC of increasing domestic violence during conflict and displacement, linked to pre-existing gender inequality which is further exacerbated by increased levels of stress for men due to lack of stability, lack of access and security to income, food and safety for their families.

Girls face specific risks: rise in early and forced marriages

Hawa, aged 16, who lives in a camp in northern Syria told IRC that "men are able to marry as the dowry is cheap now, only a tent."

Women and girls also shared how worried they were about the increase in the number of early and forced marriages in their communities and the decrease in the age at which girls are being married. This is typically due to three factors: economic pressure which leads families to accept lower dowries for marriages, attempts to preserve a girl’s honour or offer protection against rape in a context where they have had to increasingly confront the reality of sexual violence, and little to no educational opportunities for girls in neighbouring countries.

In 2014, in Jordan and Lebanon, more than 70% of violent incidents reported to the IRC staff happened in refugees’ homes. Of those incidents 80% were perpetrated by an intimate partner or someone known to the victim.

The current humanitarian response is failing to prevent violence against Syrian women and girls

Although donors and humanitarian agencies have increased awareness and support for providing life-saving services to women, girls and survivors of violence, these efforts do not rise to the level of the needs. In the Whole of Syria Response1, by November 2015, only 823,800 people had received GBV programming from the 2015 Strategic Response Plan, though there were over 13.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.4

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV) SERVICES ARE LIFE-SAVING, NOT OPTIONAL:

When a woman is raped, she has

> 72 hours to prevent potential transmission of HIV
> 120 hours to prevent unwanted pregnancy
> a few hours to ensure that life-threatening injuries do not become fatal.

Today, these life-saving services for women and girls are at risk due to lack of funding. Despite massive demand, GBV programmes accounted for less than 0.2% of the whole Regional Response Plan contributions in 2014.

Furthermore, a recent UNFPA and UNHCR-led evaluation conducted in Lebanon, Jordan, the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and northern Syria found that the Health, Shelter, and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sectors showed a significant lack of action in preventing further GBV through their humanitarian response and services.5 The evaluation found that the main guidelines to prevent GBV in humanitarian response are not well known and are not being used, that humanitarians are not held accountable for failing to fulfill their responsibilities in implementing these guidelines, and that they rarely include or engage with women and girls meaningfully or consistently.

Preventing GBV is also life-saving. Poor prevention measures mean rape survivors struggle to find adequate medical treatment, women and girls face daily violence, toilets and showers have no doors or locks and camps are poorly lit, and they have less access to food and other services than men because ration cards are issued for the (male) head of the family.

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Opportunities for donors at the February 2016 Syria Donors Conference to achieve change for women and girls

“A Syrian woman is someone who likes work, who is productive, who has a strong character, who, when faced with obstacles, will overcome them. Most of all, she is a hard worker, someone who makes things.”

-Hadeel, AGE 44, JORDAN

Host governments in the region are past the point of strain; investments must be made to aid the host countries and to ensure that women and girls find the safety that they seek.

Women and girls urgently need support to avoid, withstand and recover from the particular challenges that they face on a daily basis. Such support, if it is to achieve maximum impact, cannot be piecemeal. Rather, a comprehensive, coordinated plan - resourced, tailored to and driven by women's and girls' special needs - is the only way to achieve meaningful protection for and empowerment of this vulnerable population.

Total needed for GBV protection and prevention from 3RP and HRP protection budgets in 2016: $206 million

At the Supporting Syria and the Region conference in London on 4 February 2016, co-hosted by the United Kingdom, Germany, Kuwait Norway and the United Nations, donors have a real opportunity, and a moral obligation to support such a plan, which would include the following funding and policy commitments:

1. Ensure lifesaving services are provided to survivors of gender-based violence:

   Donors should fund 100% of the protection request in the 2016-2017 3RP and the 2016-2017 HRP and allocate at least:
   i. $168 million for GBV out of $604 million for protection overall of the 3RP which would allow:
      - 426,000 GBV survivors and persons at risk of facing GBV to receive GBV specialised services such as health care, psychosocial support and case management services
      - 3,448,446 women, girls, men and boys to be engaged in preventing GBV through awareness raising and women and girls safe spaces
   ii. $38 million for GBV emergency response inside Syria, out of $228 million for protection overall of the HRP which would allow:
      - 15,740 female and male survivors to access specialised GBV services such as health care, psychosocial support and case management services
      - 1,542,540 women, girls, men and boys to be engaged in preventing GBV through awareness raising and women and girls safe spaces

2. Ensure that preventing and mitigating GBV is the responsibility of all humanitarian actors

   Donors should:
   i. Support ongoing efforts by the GBV Area of Responsibility (AOR) to train all humanitarian sectors on GBV prevention in all the Syria crisis countries
   ii. Commit to and fund a follow up real-time evaluation one year after the trainings are delivered to measure their effectiveness for those sectors or countries not covered by the AOR ($500,000)
   iii. Hold humanitarian leaders accountable and responsible for the implementation of minimum GBV prevention measures as per the 2015 Inter-Agency Standing Committee GBV Guidelines.5

3. Funding from the HRP and 3RP will build partnerships with local, national and international organisations and institutions, strengthen their skills to respond to women’s and girls’ needs, and amplify the number of organisations delivering GBV or women’s and girls’ protection services. More specifically, the funding will:

   i. Build the capacity of humanitarian organizations in GBV response:
      - 3,860 humanitarian actors inside Syria would be trained on GBV response and prevention, namely health service providers, protection organisations, Syrian civil society organisations and human rights actors
      - 31,000 service providers in Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey
   ii. Build the capacity of government institutions in GBV emergency response:
      - 5,000 civil servants in Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey
      - All five Refugee Host Countries would have the capacity to develop, establish and further enforce standard operating procedures and protocols for survivors of GBV
   iii. Establish safe spaces for women and girls. For example, $100,000 could staff a women's centre for one year, reaching 2,000 beneficiaries each month
   iv. Increase integration of women and local organisations in the delivery of aid and supporting their participation in local, national and regional peace-building processes as per the Women, Peace and Security agenda
   v. Support GBV coordination across the region including implementation and staffing costs

Donors and humanitarian agencies must continue to prioritise the needs of Syrian women and girls in order to prevent gender-based violence, harassment, exploitation and abuse.
The International Rescue Committee (IRC) responds to the world’s worst humanitarian crises and helps people to survive and rebuild their lives. Founded in 1933 at the request of Albert Einstein, the IRC offers lifesaving care and life-changing assistance to refugees forced to flee from war, persecution or natural disaster. At work today in over 40 countries and 22 U.S. cities, we restore safety, dignity and hope to millions who are uprooted and struggling to endure. The IRC leads the way from harm to home.

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**End Notes**

1. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1mO3iwHCEY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1mO3iwHCEY)
2. "Whole of Syria: Since the onset of the emergency in Syria, five years ago, humanitarian operations have been led from several hubs: the country operation within Syria, cross-border assistance from Turkey and cross-border assistance from Jordan. In September 2014, the Whole of Syria approach was adopted as a result of UN Security Council Resolution 2165, bringing together these separate operations into a single framework, in order to maximize efficiency, reduce duplication and ensure greater accountability, effectiveness and reach of humanitarian programming." See: [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/whole-of-syria](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/whole-of-syria)
4. [http://www.unocha.org/syria](http://www.unocha.org/syria)
6. "The 2015 Inter-Agency Standing Committee Gender-based Violence (GBV) Guidelines are intended to assist humanitarian actors and communities affected by armed conflict, natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies to coordinate, plan, implement, monitor and evaluate essential actions for the prevention and mitigation of GBV across all sectors of humanitarian response. They can found online at: [http://gbvguidelines.org/](http://gbvguidelines.org/)"

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